OPINION/COMMENTARY

# 'JFK' intrigues, but what we really want is an end to secrecy

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The great family movie outing was canceled on short notice. I came down with my own wicked version of the Bush Memorial Tokyo flu bug. When the president ad-libbed that "even Democrats get the flu," he might have added journalists to his list. Just so the evening wouldn't be a total loss, the kids went on without me.

"You missed a great movie, Dad," the biggest boy said when they returned. They had seen Oliver Stone's "JFK." What, I asked the college student, had he liked most about the movie? "Well," he said after a thoughtful pause, "it's the best explanation of what might have happened to President Kennedy. I don't necessarily believe it, but it sure beats the Warren Commission's explanation."

There, I told the kids, is the great national rub. The Warren Commission's single-assassin theory has not worn well with the American public. There have been too many doubts, inconsistencies, improbabilities and startling coincidences. Once many years ago, as part of some enterprise more masochistic than journalistic, I attempted to read all the 20 or so volumes of the commission's report. I came away weary but no wiser.

For any number of reasons, the single-assassin theory has always foundered for me on the issue of motive. Even if you accept the arguments that it was physically possible for Lee Harvey Oswald to fire three rounds with such speed and unerring aim, you are still left to figure out just what would have moved him to such a momentous undertaking.

Nearly everyone who was alive that day in 1963 has a theory of what happened. And those who were not, such as my two younger children, also think they know what happened. They think, as do millions of others, that there is a lot more to the doings that day in Dallas than a one-man assassination.

There is a long way, I try to argue to my children, between doubting the Warren Commission and accepting Stone's conspiracy theory that eventually involves just about everyone in Washington except the janitors at the Pentagon.

Stone's movie serves two purposes, one constructive and another that is more sinister than helpful. Because there is still such a deep reservoir of national doubt, Stone has forced the issue. His movie and the attendant notoriety demand some response. That response should be the release of all the data now classified concerning the assassination.

The level on which the Stone movie is more sinister concerns emotional exploitation. Stone knows he is at liberty to take the Kennedy saga and shape it into his own emotional weapon. He can do that precisely because of all those things not known, all those dark suspicions lurking in the national bosom. He fills the vacuum of our anxiety with his special brand of conspiratorial paranoia.

He will have served a good cause nonetheless if we accept his provocative exercise as a goad to a new search for the ever so elusive truth.

The way to proceed is by an end to secrecy concerning the assassination. The House of Representatives could start by repealing the blanket of secrecy surrounding thousands of documents it holds. They were sealed by a House vote until 2029. They should be released now. So should the thousands of documents still classified by the CIA, the FBI and a half-dozen other agencies.

Those releases might well help answer the question of whether a new national commission should reopen the entire investigation. The need is great. We should not accept shabby conspiracy theories about a matter of such import. When I hear young people as sophisticated as my kids telling me what a great movie Stone has made, I yearn to see us do better. We should work harder at finding that truth which remains trapped by a vacuum of secrecy.

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